

Message Text

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FM AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV

TO SECSTATE WASHDC 8692

INFO AMEMBASSY AMMAN

AMEMBASSY BEIRUT

AMEMBASSY CAIRO

AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS

AMEMBASSY JIDDA

AMCONSUL JERUSALEM

DIA WASHDC

USCINCEUR VAIHINGEN FRG

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 1 OF 2 TEL AVIV 6754

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PFOR, IS, SY

SUBJ: ISRAELI PERCEPTIONS OF SYRIA: A PSYCHOLOGICAL BARRIER

BEGIN SUMMARY: THE REACTION OF MOST ISRAELIS TO THE POSSIBILITY OF NEGOTIATIONS CONCERNING THE GOLAN HEIGHTS HAS A MUCH HIGHER EMOTIONAL CONTENT THAN WAS THE CASE WITH THE SINAI. THIS DERIVES FROM THEIR NEGATIVE PERCEPTION OF SYRIANS, WHO ARE SEEN AS SOMEHOW "DIFFERENT" FROM OTHER ARABS. THE RESULT IS A PSYCHOLOGICAL BARRIER WHICH ISRAELIS CONFRONT WHEN THEY CONTEMPLATE SYRIA, A BARRIER WHICH IS THE PRODUCT PRIMARILY OF PAST HISTORY, PERCEIVED SYRIAN INTENTIONS, AND THE SYRIAN RELATIONSHIP WITH BOTH THE SOVIET UNION AND THE PLO. END SUMMARY.

1. IN CONSIDERING QUESTION OF POSSIBLE NEGOTIATIONS WITH SYRIA, ISRAELI GOVERNMENT MUST TAKE INTO ACCOUNT DIFFERENT SET OF PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS THAN IN CASE OF EGYPT. IF AND
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WHEN TALKS ACTUALLY BEGIN, PUBLIC AT LARGE IS LIABLE TO

TAKE MORE CRITICAL LOOK AT OFFICIAL NEGOTIATING POSTURE, AND WILL WANT ITS GOVERNMENT TO ASK MORE AND OFFER LESS THAN WAS CASE WITH SINAI AGREEMENT. BASIS FOR THIS ATTITUDE IS DEEPER THAN SIMPLE UNDERSTANDING OF UNFAVORABLE GEOGRAPHY OF GOLAN HEIGHTS OR CONCERN FOR SAFETY OF ISRAELI SETTLEMENTS THERE. FACT IS THAT WHEN THEY DISCUSS "ARABS" NEARLY ALL ISRAELIS ARE APT TO CONTEND THAT "SYRIANS ARE DIFFERENT," PARTICULARLY NOW AS THEY ASSESS THE INTERIM AGREEMENT WITH EGYPT AND THE PROSPECTS FOR CONDUCTING SIMILAR NEGOTIATIONS WITH SYRIA. THEY CONFRONT A PSYCHOLOGICAL BARRIER WHEN THEY CONTEMPLATE SYRIA, A BARRIER WHICH IS PRIMARILY THE PRODUCT OF (A) PAST HISTORY OF THE ISRAELI EXPERIENCE WITH SYRIA AS WRITTEN AND READ HERE; (B) PERCEIVED SYRIAN INTENTIONS; AND (C) THE COMPANY SYRIA KEEPS.

2. THE CENTRAL ROLE PLAYED BY SYRIA AND SYRIANS IN THE EVOLUTION OF MODERN ARAB NATIONALISM LEADS THOSE ISRAELIS WHO KNOW THEIR ARAB HISTORY TO CONCLUDE THAT "SYRIANS HAVE ALWAYS BEEN THIS WAY". THEY POINT OUT THAT AFTER FIRST WORLD WAR AND THROUGH THE MANDATE PERIOD IN PALESTINE IT WAS THE HASHEMITES, TOGETHER WITH MANY ARAB NOTABLES ON WHAT IS NOW CALLED THE WEST BANK, WHO WERE REALISTIC" ENOUGH TO ACCEPT THE ULTIMATE IMPLICATIONS OF THE BALFOUR DECLARATION; ON THE OTHER HAND SYRIAN NATIONALISTS, TOGETHER WITH THE FOLLOWERS OF THE MUFTI OF JERUSALEM, WERE THE MOTIVATING FORCE BEHIND THE PERIODIC DISTURBANCES WHICH, AS ISRAELIS PREFER TO RECALL, TENDED MAINLY TO SET ARAB AGAINST ARAB. IT WAS SYRIA THAT EQUIPPED AND LED THE ARAB IRREGULARS WHO PERPETRATED ATROCITIES IN THE GALILEE DURING THE WAR OF INDEPENDENCE; SYRIA WHO SHELLED FARMERS FROM THE HEIGHTS BEFORE 1967; SYRIA WHO TORTURED PRISONERS TAKEN IN EACH WAR; AND SYRIA WHO CONTINUES TO OPPRESS ITS JEWISH COMMUNITY. FINALLY, IT WAS SYRIA WHO REFUSED TO ATTEND THE GENEVA PEACE CONFERENCE IN DECEMBER 1973 AND WHO NOW REFUSES TO NEGOTIATE. ISRAELI CONCLUSION: THERE MAY BE HOPE FOR SOME CHANGES IN THE OUTLOOK OF OTHER ARAB STATES, BUT NOT SYRIA. ASAD HAS EVEN CRITICIZED SADAT FOR SIGNING AN AGREEMENT WHICH WAS BAD (SIC) FOR ISRAEL*

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3. ONE HEARS A GREAT DEAL RECENTLY OF THE CONTRAST BETWEEN EGYPT AND SYRIA--TO THE DETRIMENT OF THE LATTER--IN TERMS OF THE INTENTIONS OF EACH. ON THE ONE HAND EGYPT, NOW THAT IT HAS GONE THROUGH ITS NASSERIST PERIOD, IS DESCRIBED AS HAVING IN SADAT THE KIND OF LEADERSHIP WHICH MIGHT REFOCUS ATTENTION AND RESOURCES ON NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND, IN THE PROCESS, SEEMS INTERESTED IN STARTING A NEW RELATIONSHIP WITH ISRAEL. (OR AT LEAST SADAT HAS

"TEMPORARILY" GIVEN UP THE WAR OPTION AND, UNLESS DRAWN INTO SOMETHING BY SYRIA, APPEARS TO BE SERIOUS ABOUT TURNING A NEW PAGE.) SYRIA ON THE OTHER HAND IS SEEN AS INTENT ON EXTENDING ITS INFLUENCE WITHIN THE ARAB WORLD IN ORDER TO MAKE DAMASCUS THE FOCUS OF ARAB NATIONALISM IN THE SEVENTIES AS CAIRO WAS IN THE FIFTIES AND SIXTIES. MOST ISRAELIS BELIEVE THAT THE LONGER-TERM GOAL IS THE REESTABLISHMENT OF GREATER SYRIA. THUS FAR SYRIA IS SEEN TO HAVE HAD CONSIDERABLE SUCCESS IN THIS "PLAN", AN ASSESSMENT FOR WHICH ISRAELIS WILL POINT TO AT LEAST THREE PIECES OF EVIDENCE: (A) THE REAPPROCHEMENT WITH JORDAN, DESCRIBED BY MANY AS DESIGNED TO LEAD ULTIMATELY TO A JOINT MILITARY EFFORT AGAINST ISRAEL; (B) SYRIA'S INVITATION LAST MARCH TO THE PLO TO ESTABLISH A JOINT POLITICAL AND MILITARY COMMAND; AND (C) SYRIAN ROLE IN LEBANON, WHICH IS USUALLY DESCRIBED HERE AS "INTERVENTION" AND WHICH IS NOT SEEN AS BEING FOR CONSTRUCTIVE PURPOSES. TAKEN TOGETHER, ISRAELIS SEE THESE MOVES AS INDICATING A SYRIAN DESIRE TO ESTABLISH ON ISRAEL'S NORTH AND EAST A MILITARY CAPABILITY WHICH CAN BE BROUGHT TO BEAR INDEPENDENTLY OF WHAT EGYPT MAY DO.

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4. IF SYRIAN ACTIONS IN AND OF THEMSELVES WERE NOT SUFFICIENT, ISRAELIS ALSO SEE SYRIA AS THE ONLY ARAB CONFRONTATION STATE CLOSELY ALIGNED WITH BOTH REPEAT BOTH THE SOVIET UNION AND THE PLO. THE LOVE-HAVE ASPECT OF ISRAELI ATTITUDES TOWARD THE USSR IN GENERAL HAS BEEN DESCRIBED IN TEL AVIV 6121. IN TERMS OF SYRIA, HOWEVER, ISRAELIS ARE CONCERNED PRIMARILY WITH THE MILITARY RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE SOVIET UNION AND SYRIA WHICH, AS DISTINCT FROM THAT WITH EGYPT, HAS SHOWN NO SIGNS OF ABATEMENT. MOST COMMENTATORS, IN FACT, ASSUMED EVEN AT THE OUTSET OF THE RECENT ASAD VISIT THAT ITS PURPOSE WAS AT LEAST TO SOME DEGREE CONCERNED WITH THE ACQUISITION OF ADDITIONAL MILITARY EQUIPMENT, A VIEW THEN REINFORCED BY THE WELL-PUBLICIZED DELAY IN TH RETURN FROM MOSCOW OF THE SYRIAN DEFENSE MINISTER. MANY ISRAELIS LOOK AT THE LOSS THAT THE SOVIET UNION HAS INCURRED IN EGYPT AND ARE CONVINCED THAT SOVIETS WILL GO TO VIRTUALLY ANY LENGTH TO AVOID A SIMILAR SETBACK IN SYRIA, TO THE POINT
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OF MEETING ALMOST ANY SYRIAN REQUEST FOR ARMS.

5. SYRIA ASSUMES A PARTICULARLY NOXIOUS ASPECT FOR ISRAELIS BECAUSE OF ITS CLOSE RELATIONSHIP WITH, AND SUPPORT FOR, THE PLO. ISRAELIS IN ACT NOTE THAT TERRORISTS HAVE NOT BEEN ACTIVE IN EGYPT FOR TWENTY YEARS, WERE DECIMATED BY THE JORDANIAN ARMY IN 1970, ARE UNWANTED BY THE MAJORITY IN LEBANON TODAY, AND CONCLUDE THAT THE PLO WOULD BE IN A MUCH WEAKER POSITION WERE IT NOT FOR SYRIAN SUPPORT. NOR IS THIS SIMPLY THE EMOTIONAL REACTION OF THE AVERAGE ISRAELI. AN MFA AREA EXPERT HAS EXPRESSED THE VIEW THAT THE RECENT HIJACKING IN THE NETHERLANDS, ALLEGEDLY BY A SAIQA UNIT, WAS AN EXAMPLE OF THE LENGTHS TO WHICH SYRIA REPEAT SYRIA WOULD GO TO DISCREDIT THE INTERIM AGREEMENT AND SADAT. IN SAME VEIN, A SCHOLAR AT THE SHILOAH CENTER OF TEL AVIV UNIVERSITY (ISRAEL'S EQUIVALENT OF INSTITUTE FOR PALESTINE STUDIES) WROTE IN OCT 17 JERUSALEM POST: QUOTE...THE PLO'S QUARREL WITH EGYPT AND ITS DEPENDENCE ON SYRIA FOR OPERATIONS IN, AND FROM, LEBANON HAVE CLEARLY GIVEN THE SYRIANS WELL NIGH EXCLUSIVE INFLUENCE OVER THE PLO. END QUOTO. THIS TYPE OF THINKING IS SO PREVALENT HERE, THAT, OVER THE PAST YEAR OR TWO, SYRIANS HAVE RECEIVED PART OF THE BLAME FOR TERRORIST INCIDENTS IN ISRAEL. NEEDLESS TO SAY, THIS PLO ASPECT CONTRIBUTES GREATLY TO THE EMOTIONAL CONTENT OF ISRAELI PERCEPTIONS OF SYRIA.

6. IN SUMMARY, AS ISRAELIS VIEW THEIR NEIGHBORS TODAY THEY

ARE LIABLE TO SEE THE FOLLOWING: IN EGYPT, A COUNTRY
FINALLY BEGINNING TO FACE UP TO IS DOMESTIC PROBLEMS,
GLOBALLY TURNING TO THE WEST, BUT HOUNDED BY SYRIA FOR
ITS EFFORTS; IN JORDAN, A REGIME AT THE MOMENT BEING WOODED
BY DAMASCUS, BUT WHICH HAS NEVERTHELESS SHOWN ITS METTLE
MANY TIMES IN CONFRONTING PALESTINIAN SUBVERSION, SYRINA
INVASION, AND SOVIET OFFERS OF MILIARY EQUIPMENT; IN
LEBANON, A RULING GROUP WHICH HAS BROUGHT THE COUNTRY
PROSPERITY BUT IS NOW CONFRONTED WITH THE PROSPECT OF
LOSING IT O FORCES OF MOSLEM AND PALESTINIAN
EXJEMISM ACTIVITY ASSISTED BY SYRIA; AND IN SYRIA ITSELF,
A REGIME WHICH IS CAUSING TROUBLE FOR THE OTHER THREE, IS
SUPPORTING ARAB TERRORISM, AND IS IN VIRTUAL ALLIANCE
WITH THE SOVIET UNION--IN SHORT, THE LAST OF THEIR
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NEIGHBORS THAT MOST ISRAELIS WOULD WNAT TO DEAL WITH NEXT.
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